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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
National Foreign Assessment Center
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MEMORANDUM

Political Uncertainty in Tunisia

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Summary

The serious illness of Tunisian Prime Minister Nouira and the attack in late January by Libyan-backed Tunisian exiles on the town of Qafsah increase the likelihood of near term political instability in Tunisia. It is now uncertain who will succeed President Bourguiba.

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Political infighting is all but certain to grow among the Tunisian elite whether or not Nouira recovers sufficiently to resume political activity. Influential political figures at present include Minister of Education Mohamed Mzali, recently designated "coordinator of governmental affairs;" newly appointed Interior Minister Driss Guiga; Destour Party Director Mohamed Sayah; and the President's son and adviser, Habib Bourguiba, Jr.

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The civilian opposition--religious or secular, in-country or exile--appears not to have the capability to unseat Bourguiba or a designated successor in the near term. Opposition elements may be able to mount periodic cross-border attacks, however, and probably will become more

This paper was prepared by [] the Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East South Asia, the Directorate of Operations, and the Offices of Central Reference, Economic Research, Strategic Research, and Scientific and Weapons Research. Questions and comments may be addressed to the Chief, Near East South Asia Division,

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sophisticated in their ability to focus and intensify domestic opposition. All opposition groups can be expected to demand a more liberal system in the post-Bourguiba period. If the government reacts to these challenges with repressive measures, its legitimacy is likely to erode. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] If political unrest or a succession crisis should occur, there is a possibility that the military might abandon its generally apolitical past and step in to ensure an orderly transfer of power. Any extended use of the military for internal security purposes will also run the risk of politicizing its ranks. [REDACTED]

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Libyan leader Qadhafi is likely to continue efforts to subvert any Tunisian regime that does not loosen that country's close ties to France and adopt policies more compatible with those of Libya. Tunisia's military capabilities are inferior to those of both Libya and Algeria, and the other Arab states appear unlikely to provide Tunis the substantial political, financial, and military support necessary to construct a credible defensive capability. [REDACTED]

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Current Political Situation

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Nouira, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] may be unable to resume his duties for at least several months. There appears to be a good chance that Bourguiba will decide to replace Nouira with a younger and more vigorous successor even if he does ultimately recover. Such speculation has been fueled by the President's action early this month in replacing Tunisia's interior minister, discredited following the attack on Qafsah, with Driss Guiga, former director-general of the national security service and a personal foe of Nouira's. For the present, however, Nouira officially remains prime minister and successor-designate to the aging President Bourguiba, [REDACTED]

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Minister of Education Mohamed Mzali on 1 March was named by President Bourguiba to "coordinate governmental affairs." Mzali may be given broad authority to act for

the President in administering day-to-day matters, as did Nouira, but he has not been formally designated acting prime minister, and he of course does not have the great political strength of being designated successor to Bourguiba. By virtue of his new status, however, Mzali seems likely eventually to be named prime minister if he performs well in his current assignment. []

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Mzali is in a strong position to compete in the political infighting among the Tunisian political elite that is all but certain to develop in the present circumstances. Like Bourguiba and Nouira, he was born in the central Tunisian town of Monastir, and he is a distant relative of the President. Mzali derives strength from his relative youth (he is 54), his lack of identification with either of the factions that clashed during the Destour Party Congress in September 1979, and his broad support within the party. The majority of party officials throughout Tunisia are teachers--they look to Minister of Education Mzali as their protector. In this capacity, Mzadi has established valuable credentials as a proponent of Arabization, which is an increasingly important issue in the current climate of resurgent Islam and Arab cultural pride. []

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Other principal actors in the near term are likely to include Destour Party Director Mohamed Sayah and the President's son, Habib Bourguiba, Jr. Sayah is widely disliked for his blatant opportunism and manipulation of the party machinery, but he obviously derives substantial political power from his position and can be expected to attempt to eclipse Mzali. Bourguiba, Jr's. poor health and limited political abilities make it somewhat less likely that he will be a contender for the prime minister's job, but he is likely to be more active in his current position as special adviser to the President, as suggested by his recent visit to Washington. []

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Were Bourguiba to be succeeded in the near term by any of these persons--or by National Assembly President Sadok Mokaddem, who would be interim president if Bourguiba died with no prime minister in office--we would expect no dramatic alteration of government policy, domestic or foreign. With the possible exception of Sayah, all of these leaders are

well disposed toward the West, including France and the US; all are suspicious of Tunisia's larger and more radical neighbors, Libya and Algeria; and all are conservatives of the Bourguiba mold on matters of domestic economic and social policy. []

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The current political uncertainty in Tunisia may have the effect, however, of slowing even the limited recent progress that has been made toward political liberalization. Although he is no political liberal, Nouri did seek to strengthen his own following over the past year by releasing a number of political detainees and introducing innovations in the November 1979 legislative elections that included an element of popular choice and permission for opposition candidates to run. The apparent lack of interest by other high-level leaders in such measures, coupled with Tunisia's heightened security problems, is likely to preclude near term progress toward political liberalization. Bourguiba may seek to rejuvenate the government and undercut the opposition by bringing new faces into important posts, but he is unlikely to change the fundamental structure of the present authoritarian system. []

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Potential for Instability

There is no substance to the continuing charges by Libyan information media that the recent raid on Qafsa stimulated widespread civil disorder within Tunisia. There does exist in the country, however, a growing potential for social and political instability resulting primarily from frustrated economic expectations and the cultural dislocation borne of rapid social change. These forces manifested themselves in early 1978 in a violent general strike and a subsequent government crackdown on organized labor, and more recently in student and labor strikes and in the Arabization issue and heightened Islamic consciousness. []

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Ironically, economic discontent in Tunisia is in large part a function of the strength of the economy and the educational system over the past several years. A high rate of domestic growth, the education of a substantial proportion of school-age youths, and the export of unskilled labor to Europe and Libya have created high expectations among all classes of Tunisians. Recent developments have served to

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frustrate these expectations, however. The reduction of employment opportunities in Western Europe during the mid-1970s and the failure of the domestic economy to create enough jobs to match the growing labor force resulted in growing unemployment, especially among the quarter of the population between the ages of 16 and 25. The current crisis with Libya has forced the return to Tunisia of a portion of the 70 to 100 thousand workers in that country, and presumably will reduce worker remittances substantially from the estimated \$80 million received in 1979. If the government implements plans to increase its defense spending--now running at approximately \$170 million per year, or 6 percent of the budget--at the expense of other programs, this too will erode the general standard of living. [REDACTED]

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The potential for domestic unrest is increased also by the growth over the past year of feelings of cultural, linguistic, and religious pride. Tunisia is among the most Westernized of the Arab states, President Bourguiba has promoted avowedly secular policies since independence, and almost all Tunisians follow a relatively liberal school of Sunni Islam. Even in this climate, however, the example of the Islamic revolution in Iran has had an impact. Tunisian fundamentalists share with those in Iran a need to reaffirm native cultural values at the expense of Western ideals superimposed in the process of modernization. The Islamic revival seems to have had the greatest appeal to the urban middle class, and especially to the politically conscious young. The latter apparently believe that they have found in the resurgence of Islam a politically acceptable way to vent their unhappiness with economic, social, and political conditions in Tunisia. [REDACTED]

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The religious leader in contemporary Tunisia known to have capitalized most effectively on the resurgence of Islamic consciousness is Abdelfatah Moro, a young attorney. His following, which may number from several hundreds to several thousands, consists largely of educated youth who--until security services intervened--met in small groups to hear him speak. Moro calls for a return to the more conservative doctrines of Islam, and contends that the government must be composed of religious men subject to the guidance of religious leaders. The government has taken steps to

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limit Moro's political activities, believing that the clandestine nature of his activities poses a serious potential threat. The government also monitors the activities of the proliferating Islamic student groups in high schools and at the University of Tunis, and has taken some symbolic steps, such as the construction of mosques, to forestall the emergence of a politically significant fundamentalist movement. [REDACTED]

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Organized opposition groups within Tunisia are generally weak, and they have made no attempt to capitalize on the country's current political uncertainty or security concerns. The group with the widest following, primarily from the professional middle class, is the Social Democrats led by Ahmed Mestiri. It is a loyalist offshoot of the Destour Party that has demonstrated no capacity to mobilize the disaffected young. Mestiri's outlook is in fact so much like that of the present regime that there has been recent speculation in Tunisia that Bourguiba might attempt to bring him into the government. Former foreign minister Mohamed Masmoudi, discredited for his involvement with the abortive unity agreement with Libya in 1974, retains ties to the radical Arabs, including Libya, but he has no significant domestic following. The Labor Confederation is now ineffectual with its leader, Habib Achour, still under loose house arrest, although it represents a source of great potential political power. The small Communist and Baathist groups have little following and no known capacity to raise a political challenge to the regime. [REDACTED]

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The exiled leader who may retain a wide latent following inside Tunisia is Ahmed Ben Salah, Bourguiba's former economic czar who lives in France. He has no effective organization, but because of his identification with Tunisia's "collectivist" economic experiment in the late 1960s is widely seen as a symbolic alternative to Bourguiba's conservative economic and social policies. Ben Salah and followers pose no real threat to the regime, but are conceivable beneficiaries if fundamental political changes should occur. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the known civilian opponents of the regime--religious or secular, in-country or exile--do not now have the capability to unseat Bourguiba or to seize control during a succession period if the President should die in the near term. Opposition elements may have the capacity to mount periodic cross-border attacks, however, and probably will become more sophisticated in their ability to focus and intensify domestic opposition. This opposition presumably will coalesce more quickly if the current regime takes increasingly authoritarian measures at home to counter the currently perceived security threat, or if succession uncertainties should lead to extended political maneuvering among the elite following Bourguiba's death. Repression over an extended period almost certainly would cause the regime to lose much of its legitimacy and serve to politicize the armed forces. [REDACTED]

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Attitudes of the Military

If political unrest or a succession crisis should occur in the near term, there is a possibility that the Tunisian military might abandon its generally apolitical past and step in to ensure an orderly transfer of power. We have no evidence of widespread, anti-government activity within the military, or of serious disaffection among the officer corps or in enlisted ranks. Neither have we seen the succession process tested in Tunisia, [REDACTED]

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Senior officers of the 29,000-man military are drawn in large part from the same ranks of the Tunisian establishment as now form the government and party elite. If these officers were to seize power in their own right or to control a nominally civilian successor regime, we might see established either a reformist regime determined to pursue a limited liberalization or--probably more likely--a continued authoritarian system not unlike that of Bourguiba. In either case, the broad outlines of Tunisian foreign policy probably would remain unchanged. [REDACTED]

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Our knowledge of the backgrounds and attitudes of middle-ranking and junior officers is so limited that we cannot confidently predict what policies might be followed if they were to come to power. In all likelihood, however, a regime controlled by such officers would be much more attuned to the Arab and Islamic cultural values increasingly endorsed by Tunisia's young, disposed to orient policy toward the other Arabs rather than toward France or the US, and inclined--at a minimum--toward a vigorous and genuine non-alignment. A small number of these officers, especially those coming from less developed southern Tunisia, may espouse radical Arab views. [REDACTED]

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Regional Security

The chief concern of Tunisian foreign policy--protecting the country from its larger and more radical neighbors--has been heightened anew by the Qafsa raid, [REDACTED]

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Tunisia's sense of insecurity in the region is of course based in large part on its military inferiority vis-a-vis Libya and Algeria. The dramatic buildup of Libya's and Algeria's armed forces since the mid-1970s has spurred Tunisia to modernize its forces, but Tunis lacks the resources to keep pace with its wealthier neighbors. With little hope of reversing its military inferiority, Tunisia has adopted a defense strategy that is designed to capitalize on its limited assets. The Tunisians are seeking to develop a ground capability sufficient to conduct a delaying action against invading Algerian or Libyan forces, so that the government could call for international intervention. At the same time, Tunis wants its forces to be strong enough not to invite aggression by bordering states. [REDACTED]

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Despite the attention the Tunisians have paid to improving their conventional forces, the government realizes that the greater immediate threat may lie in continued foreign sponsored subversive activities. The recent commando assault on Qafsah points up the difficulties of defending against such meddling, but Tunisian security forces are on guard for any evidence of infiltration or subversion, particularly involving the Libyans. [REDACTED]

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Largely because of financial constraints, the modernization program initiated in 1975 has made uneven progress, failing to correct several serious deficiencies in the military. Tunisia's air defenses, for example, are generally ineffective. All F-86 fighters are grounded, no early warning radar system exists, the Army has a small number of antiaircraft artillery guns, and the few Chaparral SAMs could defend only a limited area. Ground and air transport capabilities are weak; the Air Force has no fixed-wing transport aircraft and the Army can move a fraction of its tanks on transporters. The Army has few field artillery guns, limited antitank weapons, and a small armored force. Much of the military's equipment is obsolescent, and combat readiness is adversely affected by civic action programs and the short tour of duty for conscripts. [redacted]

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The Tunisians hope to secure funds from [redacted] conservative Arab oil producing states to finance the equipment purchases necessary to strengthen their forces. [redacted]

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The Arabs in general have provided Tunisia only limited political backing in its current dispute with Libya. The meeting of Arab League foreign ministers that was held in late February to consider the Tunisian complaints did reaffirm the provisions in the League charter that call for non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states. It balanced this, however, with a clear if indirect criticism of Tunisia's hasty action in calling for French and American assistance. Of the Arab states, only Egypt is capable and inclined to assist Tunisia if it should become embroiled in a military clash with Libya. The possibility of Egyptian military involvement in such a dispute on Tunisia's side almost certainly will be a restraining factor on the future actions of Libyan leader Qadhafi. [redacted]

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The French Role

France under President Giscard has intervened militarily in the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Chad, the Central African Republic and Zaire--sometimes to protect a large economic stake, sometimes to fulfill a commitment to defend a former colony or preserve an historic legacy of influence, sometimes to deny influence to some other power. There is no doubt that France would do as much if not more for Tunisia if it were seriously threatened by Libyan-backed destabilization. France feels a special moral commitment to Tunisia in addition to its concern about the security of its southern borders and its desire to maintain political stability and the present strategic balance in the Mediterranean. France also believes that instability in northern Africa invites Soviet interference. France would prefer, of course, that regional tensions be reduced through quiet bilateral diplomacy.

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Giscard is proud of France's record in Africa and rarely lets pass an occasion to indicate that he would not hesitate again to counteract--alone and by military means if necessary--destabilization attempts there. France willingly accepts its role in the "division of labor" among the Western allies in maintain stability in the Third World and has shown itself willing to take the lead for the West to preserve the status quo in Africa against the Libyans, Cuban/Soviets or Algerians.

[redacted]

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The French Government last month reiterated Giscard's statement of support for Tunisia that he made during his official visit to Tunis in 1978; "France remains profoundly attached to political stability in the Mediterranean, to the independence and security of its states and notably, that of Tunisia." The rapidity with which France responded by a naval show of force to Tunisia's request for help, following the Libyan-backed raid in southern Tunisia in late January, indicates that France is willing to back up its assurances.

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At the same time France is keenly aware of Tunisian and Algerian sensitivities, its own role as a friend of the Arabs, the position of strength Libya holds in the area

and France's own commercial interests in Libya. France's logistical support to Tunisia following the Qafsah raid consisting of two helicopters and two aircraft, was withdrawn on 12 February, and France decided to postpone a French naval visit to Tunisia scheduled for late February in order to reduce French military visibility in the area.

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French military support for a Tunisia beleaguered by its neighbors would be popular in France among all but the French communists and others on the left who would predictably charge "neocolonialism" and "imperialism." Much would depend on the circumstances of the French involvement, and Giscard would have to be cautious in a presidential election year. However, his popularity was never higher than following the rapid, successful French intervention in Shaba. We believe the French will be willing to increase their economic aid to Tunisia but will probably move more slowly on military aid because of its visibility.

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Soviet Interests

The Soviets share with Libya an interest in undermining Western influence in northern Africa and in fostering the emergence of radical elements there, including in Tunisia. They prefer, however, not to become directly involved in the subversive or aggressive aspects of such a policy; remaining one step removed from such activities enables them to avoid alienating regional states with which they are simultaneously pursuing good bilateral relations.

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The Soviets have adopted a high-tone, balanced public position toward recent events in Tunisia, appealing to both Libya and Tunisia to settle their problems through negotiations. While thus seeking to maintain a respectable distance from the incident, they may also, in this instance, view the Libyan action with some skepticism and consider it counter-productive. A Moscow radio broadcast in French on 4 February warned that the Qafsah incident could give the "imperialists" a pretext to interfere in the area; the broadcast mentioned the arrival of French warships on the Tunisian coast and the announced willingness of the US to provide military aid to Tunisia.

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Despite this public position on the Qafsah incident, the Soviets would only benefit by increased instability in Tunisia and the possible demise of Bourguiba, who has aligned Tunisia with the West and consistently criticized the Soviet Union. Tunisia's willingness to support the US in the UN Security Council on recent resolutions relating to Iran and Afghanistan, its vigorous public denunciation of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan, and its role at the Islamic Conference in pushing for a harsh anti-Soviet resolution fueled Moscow's antipathy for Bourguiba. In general, the Soviets would undoubtedly concur in Libyan efforts to weaken his government in the hope that his successors would prove more amenable to Soviet interests in the area.

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